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ABSTRACT

Utilizing data derived from a stratified random sample of disadvantaged farm families (DFF) living in 3 northeastern North Carolina counties (N=42, 56, and 32 families from Bertie, Halifax, and Northampton respectively), study objectives were to test the homogeneity thesis of the culture of poverty theory via a comparison of a selected set of characteristics. The 14 characteristics usually associated with the poor and used for purposes of DFF comparisons were: age; education; participation in social organizations; anomia; present/future orientation; registered to vote; voting participation; knowledge of elected representatives; ethnic background (84% of these families were black); health index; occupational mobility; residential mobility; family size; and type of family. Results indicated the DFF differed dramatically from the generalized conception of the poor in regard to voter registration, participation in voting, and residential and occupational mobility, while smaller discrepancies occurred in present value orientation, family size, and family type. It was concluded that voter registration and participation discrepancies were probably due to the recent civil rights movement, while occupational/residential mobility discrepancies were probably due to the traditional character of the DFF, a phenomenon providing justification for conceptualizing the poor along a rural-urban dichotomy. (JC)

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A TEST OF THE HOMOGENEITY THESIS OF THE CULTURE OF POVERTY THEORY: CHARACTERISTICS OF DISADVANTAGED FARM FAMILIES

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
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PREFACE

This study utilized data collected for North Carolina Agricultural Experiment Station Research Project No. 13325 entitled *Decision-Making and Communication Patterns of Disadvantaged Farm Families in the North Carolina Coastal Plains Area* (Technical Bulletin No. 245). The objective of the larger research project was to obtain information that would help North Carolina educational organizations and agencies acquire added insights about disadvantaged farm families (DFF) suitable for use in designing educational programs for those families.

This study sought to test the homogeneity thesis of the culture of poverty theory. More specifically, this study addressed the question whether or not the poor are a homogeneous population with respect to a selected set of characteristics. It sought to determine if the disadvantaged population included in Research Project 13325 possessed the characteristics attributed to families who exist in a condition of poverty.

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A Test of the Homogeneity Thesis of the Culture of Poverty Theory: Characteristics of Disadvantaged Farm Families

INTRODUCTION

Oscar Lewis advanced the theory that very low-income people exist in a distinct subculture that he termed a "culture of poverty."[1] Lewis (1965, p. xlii-xliii) further conceptualized poverty "as a subculture with its own structure and rationale; as a way of life which is passed down from generation to generation along family lines," and set forth his theory very cogently when he wrote:

> The culture of poverty is both an adaptation and a reaction of the poor to their marginal position. . . . It represents an effort to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair which develop from the realization of the improbability of achieving success in terms of the values and goals of the larger society. Indeed many of the traits of the culture of poverty can be viewed as attempts at local solutions for problems not met by existing institutions and agencies. . . .
>
> The culture of poverty, however, is not only an adaptation to a set of objective conditions of the larger society. Once it comes into existence, it tends to perpetuate itself from generation to generation because of its effect on the children. By the time slum children are age six or seven they have usually absorbed the basic values and attitudes of their subculture.

According to Thomas (1972), Lewis' statement suggests three basic dimensions of a culture of poverty. These dimensions are:

1. The possession of a shared set of characteristics or traits that make the poor a homogeneous population;
2. Socializing mechanisms which cause the young to acquire the dominant values and behaviors of the subculture; and
3. The persistence and preservation of such socializing mechanisms over a period of time so that the values and behavior of the subculture are passed on from generation to generation.

THE PROBLEM

The theory of a poverty subculture is centered on the first of the foregoing three dimensions. That is, proponents of the culture of poverty theory argue that the poor have distinct traits that set them apart from

[1] Lewis (1965, p. xliii) actually perceived poverty and its associated traits as a subculture, but used "culture of poverty" as a shorter term.

the larger society. Lewis (1964) listed 70 such traits. Many others also have conceptualized the poor as homogeneous (Harrington, 1962; Glazer and Moynihan, 1963; Cohen, 1964; Irelan and Besner, 1965; Chilman, 1966; and Anderson and Niemi, 1969). Yet there is some question as to whether or not the poor have such a sufficiently large set of common characteristics so as to be judged homogeneous. In reviewing the literature related to the theory of a culture of poverty, Kelley found many contradictory descriptions of the poor. For example, Kelley (1971, p. 17) observed that the poor "are said to be language impoverished and simultaneously rich in verbal imagery. They are reported to have low motivation for success but . . . several studies indicate otherwise."

Harper (1972) also questioned the homogeneity of the subculture, arguing that a group will have its own culture only to the extent that individuals of that group remain isolated from other cultural groups. Such isolation, he contended, is impossible in a modern industrial society, and thus individuals have a variety of behaviors to emulate. Furthermore, he argued that the effect of the individual's unique personality makeup causes those encountering the same reality to react differently.

There is also a body of empirical research that has failed to find evidence that the poor share homogeneous traits. In his study of the social composition of "Aide to Dependent Children" families, Moore (1974) found heterogeneity rather than homogeneity to be the rule. Satterlee (1970) refuted the culture of poverty assumptions of homogeneity among his population of low-income families. Many other researchers (Goode, 1960; Friedlander, 1966; Lefton, 1967; Kriesberg, 1970; Cook, 1971; Kaplin, 1971; Goodwin, 1972; and Davidson and Gaitz, 1974) have conducted studies in which few or no differences were detected between the values of poor and nonpoor respondents.

Dimensions two and three of the culture of poverty theory (p. 1) also have been called into question, and they constitute important issues in the continuing debate. However, their resolution, as pointed out by Davidson and Gaitz (1974, p. 230), "is not necessarily related to the question about the incidence of those traits that for better or worse have been called 'symptoms' of a culture of poverty."

Thus, this study focuses on Thomas' first dimension; that is, it addresses the question whether or not the poor are a homogeneous population with respect to a selected set of characteristics. More specifically, it seeks to determine if the disadvantaged population of this study possessed the characteristics attributed to families who exist in a condition of poverty.

METHODOLOGY

Population and Sample

The target population consisted of disadvantaged farm families (DFF) in three northeastern North Carolina counties—Bertie, Halifax, and Northampton. A DFF is defined as a man, wife, and children (if any) domiciled together and meeting the criteria of: (1) farming a production unit of 10 acres or more from which total receipts are $50 or more

annually, or farming a production unit of 9 acres or less from which a total annual return of $250 or more is realized; and (2) having an income below the eligiblity standard set for the North Carolina Social Services Food Stamp Program in 1972 (i.e., $4,320 per year for a family of four).

Utilizing the services of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service and the North Carolina Department of Social Services, a list was made for each of the three counties of those families expected to meet the criteria for DFF. From those lists a stratified random sample of 25 food stamp recipient families and 25 nonrecipient families was drawn for each county.

In addition to three county samples of 25 each from the food stamp and nonfood stamp lists, a back-up subsample also was drawn from Bertie and Halifax counties to be used in case any of the original samples failed to meet the criteria after being subjected to screening questions. This proved to be the case in the field, and part of the subsample was used. A sample size of 150 DFF was thought to be all that time and resources would permit the project to undertake.

Three criteria were developed to screen the population for income, size of farm, and family (man and wife with or without children domiciled together). Of the 294 DFF selected as possible subjects for the study, 130 met all the criteria for participation.

The original design of the study contemplated an equal number of DFF in each of the three counties selected for study. However, stratification of the sample on Social Service Food Stamp participants shifted the absolute frequency counts of qualified families. The final distribution of participating DFF by county is shown in Table 1. Rather than having exactly one-third of the respondents in each county, Bertie had 32 percent; Halifax, 43 percent; and Northampton, 25 percent.

Table 1. Distribution of respondent disadvantaged farm families, by county

County	DFF	
	N	%
Bertie	42	32
Halifax	56	43
Northampton	32	25
Total	130	100

Traits Used to Characterize Disadvantaged Farm Families

The focus of this study is on family units. However, many characteristics attributed to a family in a culture of poverty require that individuals be measured. When this requirement arose, the head of the household (husband) was measured, and the family unit was characterized on the

basis of that measurement. Individual family heads in the population studied were examined with regard to social, psychological, and political characteristics; family units were examined in terms of socioeconomic characteristics.

Several generalizations may be drawn from a review of the literature on the poor. In terms of social characteristics, the disadvantaged population is said to have a high proportion of older individuals, with low levels of education, and also with low levels of participation in social organizations. In terms of psychological characteristics, the disadvantaged individual is said to possess, among other things, high levels of anomia and a present value orientation. As for political characteristics, the disadvantaged are regarded as being below average in such areas as voter registration and participation in elections, and unaware of the names of their elected representatives. In regard to the socioeconomic characteristics of family units, literature on poverty indicates that there is a high incidence of poverty among black families, that disadvantaged families are in poor health, are highly mobile—occupationally and residentially, are of large size, are likely to be of the extended family type, and have a low standard of living.

Given this list of characteristics, it was necessary to operationalize them in such a way as to measure whether or not each is found among the individuals and families of the study. As much as possible, data from the Bureau of Census or other reliable sources were used to establish criteria for evaluating the presence or absence of a characteristic.

Measurement of the Traits Used to Characterize Disadvantaged Farm Families

Social Traits

Age: According to the Bureau of Census (1975), the rounded median age of heads of household among the total population in 1973 was 45 years. Thus, the heads of household (husbands) of this study were classified as "young" if they were 45 or less; those over 45 years of age were classified as "old."

Education: According to the Bureau of the Census (1975), the rounded national median number of years of school completed in 1973 was 12. Thus, those with less than 12 years of education were categorized as "low" in educational attainment; those with 12 years or more of education were categorized as "high."

Participation in Social Organizations: The Moon-McCann (1966) variation of Chapin's (1928) social participation scale was used to measure social participation. Scores could range from zero to 36. To dichotomize the scores into high and low categories, scores over 18 (the midpoint of the range) were counted as high; scores of 18 or less were counted as low.

Psychological Traits

Anomia: The anomia level of the disadvantaged population of this study was measured and the population was then dichotomized into high and low categories. The Moon-McCann (1965) adaptation of the Guttman-

type anomie scale developed by Srole (1956) was used to measure anomie. Scores could range from 6 to 18 (the higher the score the lower the level of anomia). Taking 12 as the midpoint, scores above 12 were labeled as low and scores of 12 or less were labeled as high.

Present/Future Value Orientation: The instrumentation to measure present/future value orientation was adapted from Rosen (1956). The scoring limits for the responses were 7 and 21. The larger the score, the greater the future orientation. A score of 14 was taken as the midpoint of the range. Thus scores of 14 or less were categorized as low in future orientation, while scores greater than 14 were categorized as high in future orientation.

Political Traits

Registered to Vote: A simple dichotomy of "yes" or "no" was sufficient for this characteristic. According to the U. S. Bureau of Census (1974), the national average for voting registration in 1972 was 73.9 percent. Using this national percentage as a base, DFF were characterized as high in voter registration if 73.9 percent or more were registered to vote or as low if less than 73.9 percent were registered.

Degree of Voting Participation: The U. S. Bureau of Census (1974) reported that 55.7 percent of the registered voters participated in the 1972 presidential election. Using the national percentage as a base, DFF were characterized as low in voting participation if less than 55.7 percent voted in the 1972 presidential election, or as high in voting participation if 55.7 percent or more voted in that election.

Knowledge of Elected Representatives: Husbands in the DFF were asked if they knew the names of their representatives in the North Carolina Senate, in the North Carolina House of Representatives, and on the Board of County Commissioners. Total "yes" and "no" responses were then tabulated. If the number of "yes" responses was larger than the "no" responses, the population was labeled as high in knowledge of elected representatives. If the number of "no" responses was greater than the "yes" responses, the population was labeled as low in knowledge of elected representatives.

Socioeconomic Traits

Ethnic Background: According to statistics presented by the Bureau of Census (1975), 31.6 percent of U. S. families in 1973 were black. This percentage figure was taken as the base by which to determine if the study population had a high percentage of black DFF families. That is, if more than 31.6 percent of the families were black, then the population was labeled as being high in number of black families.

Health: The family health index quantified the health of the family and the health care that it received. With a score of zero to 9, 5 was taken as the midpoint. Families with scores of less than 5 were placed in the low category, and families with scores of 5 or more were placed in the high category.

Occupational Mobility: This characteristic was measured by asking DFF how long they had been in their present tenure arrangement. If they had maintained their present tenure status for 4 years or less, they

were categorized as high mobility type. If they had maintained their present tenure status for more than 4 years, they were categorized as low mobility type.

Residential Mobility: To measure residential mobility, the population of this study was dichotomized into high and low by arbitrarily selecting the figure of 3 years of residence on present farm as the dividing point. That is, DFF who had lived on their present farms less than 3 years were labeled as high mobility type, while those who had lived on their present farms for 3 years or more were labeled as low mobility type.

Family Size: The Bureau of the Census (1975) indicates that the mean family size in the United States in 1973 was 3.44. This figure was used as the base by which to determine if the sizes of DFF were larger than average.

Type of Family: DFF were characterized as either nuclear or extended (i.e., nuclear—a husband and wife plus those children they identify as their own and for whom they assume the role of parent, and extended—those persons defined as being kin and their nuclear families, Bertrand, 1967). If 50 percent or more of the families were of the extended type, then DFF were labeled as being of the extended type.

Data Collection

Data for the research project were collected via personal interview with DFF in the three counties during May, 1973. The interviews were made by 20 two-member teams. Comprising the 20 teams were Extension administration personnel, Extension Specialists, faculty from the Department of Adult and Community College Education at North Carolina State University, graduate research assistants, and county Extension agents.

The Test for a Homogeneous Population

An essential dimension of the theory of a culture of poverty is the contention that families in a state of poverty are homogeneous; i.e., they share a set of common characteristics. Fourteen of these characteristics attributed to the poor have been operationalized so that it may be determined whether or not DFF possess these characteristics. Table 2 lists these 14 characteristics and indicates the "cutting scores," or the points at which a particular family is regarded as possessing these characteristics.

The literature on poverty offered no guidelines as to how many of the 14 characteristics a family must possess before it is judged to be in a culture of poverty. Therefore, the researchers decided that if a family possessed more than half (8 or more) of the 14 characteristics, then it would be judged to be in a culture of poverty. For the theory of a culture of poverty to be accepted, over half of the families (66 or more) must be judged to be in a culture of poverty.

Table 2. Characteristics attributed to the poor, and "cutting scores" for each characteristic

Characteristic	Cutting Score
1. Age	46 years and over
2. Education	11 years and less
3. Participation in social organizations	18 and less
4. Anomia	12 and less
5. Present/future value orientation	14 and less
6. Registered to vote	73.8 percent or less
7. Voting participation	55.6 percent or less
8. Knowledge of elected representatives	50.1 percent or more "no" responses
9. Ethnic background	31.6 percent or more of the families are black
10. Health index	4 and less
11. Occupational mobility	In present tenure arrangement for 4 years or less
12. Residential mobility	Lived on present farm 2 years or less
13. Family size	Mean size of 3.45 and more
14. Type of family	50 percent or more of the families are of the extended type

RESULTS

According to criteria established for this study, a family was considered to be in a culture of poverty if it possessed 8 or more of the 14 characteristics attributed to a family in poverty. For the thesis of a culture of poverty to be accepted, over half (66 or more) of the 130 DFF must be included in a culture of poverty. Table 3 shows that over half (97, or 75 percent) of the DFF did indeed possess at least 8 such characteristics.[2] This finding supports the hypothesis of homogeneity and, thus, the existence of a culture of poverty.

To make further determinations about the characteristics possessed by DFF, a frequency distribution was made (Table 4). The results of this frequency distribution were most revealing. First, the DFF were observed to be homogeneous within themselves, in that an overwhelming number either did or did not possess a certain characteristic. Exceptions were present value orientation, large family size, and extended family type. Secondly, as a group, the DFF possessed over half (8 of 14) of the characteristics. Finally, although DFF possessed over half of the poverty characteristics, they were different from the way the poor are generally pictured in regard to voter registration, participation in voting, and occupational and residential mobility. Smaller discrepancies existed with regard to present value orientation and family type.

[2] It will be recalled that some of the characteristics required measurements of individuals rather than family units, and that husbands' scores were used in these situations. When wives' scores were used instead, 93 (72%) of the families fell into a culture of poverty.

Table 3. Number of families possessing characteristics of the culture of poverty (husbands' scores)[1]

	Number of Characteristics Possessed by the Family		Families N	Families %
DFF not in a culture of poverty	1			
	2			
	3			
	4			
	5	xxxx	4	3
	6	xxxxxxx	11	8
	7	xxxxxx xxxxxxxxx	18	14
		Subtotal	33	25
DFF in a culture of poverty	8	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	41	32
	9	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	26	20
	10	xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx	24	18
	11	xxxxx	5	4
	12	x	1	1
	13			
	14			
		Subtotal	97	75
		Grand Total	130	100

[1] More than one half of the DFF (66 or more) must possess 8 or more of the characteristics before the culture of poverty theory is accepted.

Table 4. Frequency distribution of poverty characteristics possessed by disadvantaged farm families

Culture of Poverty Characteristic	No. of DFF Possessing This Characteristic	No. of DFF Not Possessing This Characteristic
Of older age	102	28
Low educational level	125	5
Low level of participation in social organizations	125	5
High anomia level	102	28
Present value orientation	65	65
Not registered to vote	35	95
Nonparticipation in voting	23	107
Little knowledge of elected representatives	126	4
Black	108	22
Poor health	117	13
High occupational mobility	18	112
High residential mobility	3	127
Large family size	69	61
Extended family type	60	70

DISCUSSION

The culture of poverty theory consists of three basic dimensions: (1) a shared set of characteristics or traits that make the poor a homogeneous population, (2) socializing mechanisms to pass these characteristics on to the young, and (3) the persistence and preservation of such socializing mechanisms over an extended period of time. This study focused on the first dimension, i.e., the homogeneity thesis that the poor share a set of common characteristics that make them a homogeneous population. More specifically, this study sought to determine if DFF possessed the characteristics commonly attributed to families in a condition of poverty. The homogeneity thesis was tested by comparing the characteristics of a specific poverty population (DFF) with generally accepted characteristics of the poor.

The findings of the study are revealing. While the DFF of this study met the criteria established for validating the homogeneity thesis, extreme discrepancies existed. The DFF differed dramatically from the generalized conception of the poor in regard to voter registration, participation in voting, and occupational and residential mobility. Smaller discrepancies also were observed regarding present value orientation, family size, and family type.

To a great extent the discrepancies regarding voter registration and voting participation probably were due to a rigorous civil rights movement over the past decade to increase political activity among the black population of the study area. It will be recalled that the bulk (84 percent) of the respondents of this study were black.

The discrepancies regarding occupational and residential mobility were doubtlessly genuine due to the traditional character of the DFF population. That is, DFF, unlike the urban poor, are strongly bound to their occupation and home community by ties of tradition. It is probable that these mobility discrepancies were the result of a rural-urban dichotomy.

It is obvious that, as a group, DFF are homogeneous within themselves. It is likely that the urban poor also constitute a homogeneous group. Thus, there seems to be more justification for conceptualizing the poor along a rural-urban dichotomy. Existing in a traditional milieu, the rural poor probably differ considerably from the urban poor who have no traditional ties to their community, and the current culture of poverty hypothesis is not sufficient for conceptualizing the rural and urban poor simultaneously.

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